

Lessons of Arlington's Urban Development Needn't Be Just History

The phenomenal metamorphosis of Arlington County's Rosslyn-Ballston corridor, among the region's most dramatic real estate transformations, teaches a timely lesson: Successful urban revitalization requires long-range planning and long-range public investment that sparks private investment.

Unfortunately, America seems to have ignored this lesson.

The Washington region offers ample evidence of lapses: years of delays and funding impediments surrounding the Metrorail extension to Dulles International Airport, debate about adding a Metro station to serve Potomac Yard in Alexandria and arguments about the Maryland Transit Administration's proposed Purple Line linking Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

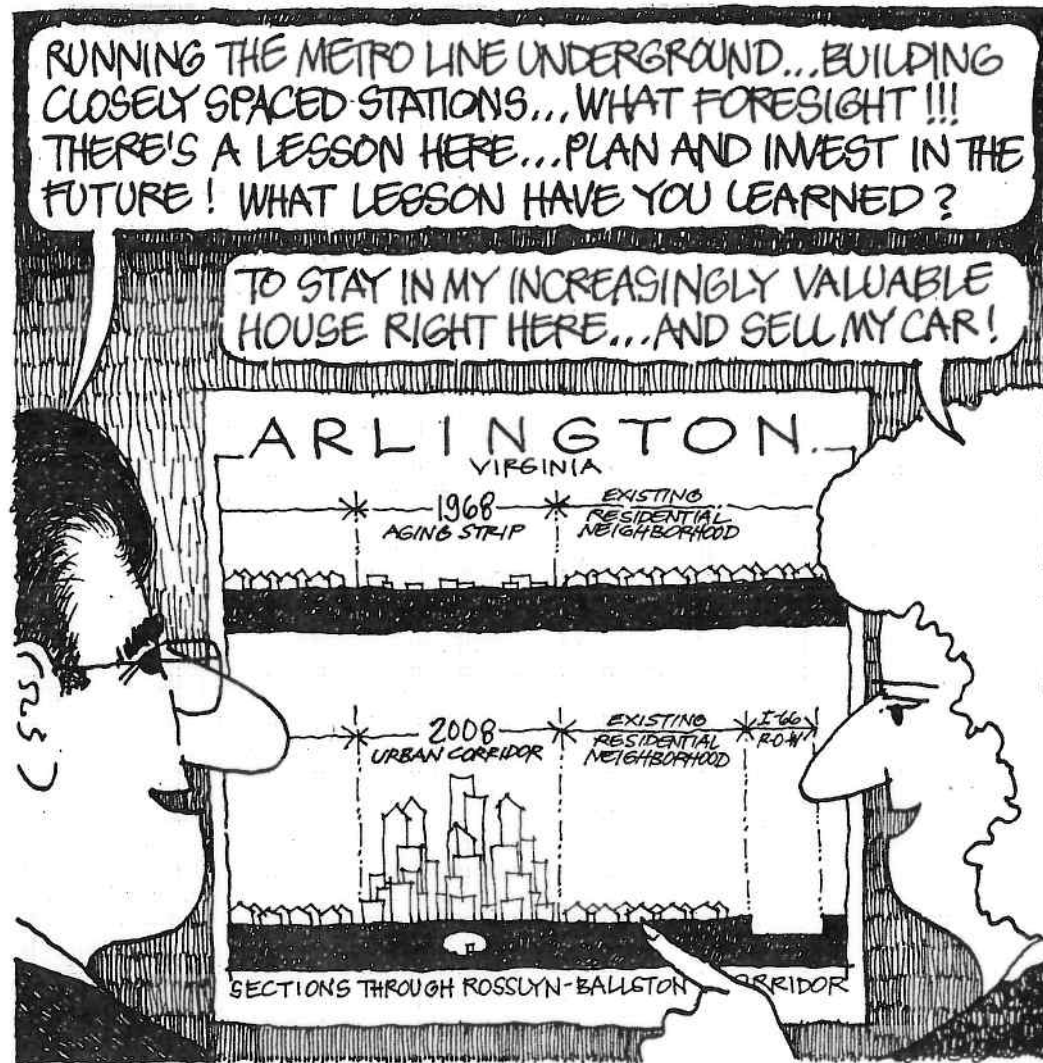
If Washington's Metro system were proposed today, it would stand little chance of being built.

When Metro was mapped out more than 40 years ago, a very different attitude prevailed. Arlington planners and politicians were bold, optimistic and foresighted. They insisted that the Orange Line to Vienna run underground through Arlington, following Wilson Boulevard and Fairfax Drive, rather than running along the Interstate 66 right of way, which would have been the path of least resistance and at the lowest cost. And they wanted five closely spaced stations from Rosslyn to Ballston.

Arlington leaders were predicting, some would say gambling, that the extra cost of running the line underground and building those five stations would someday yield big returns. They expected that billions of dollars of private real estate investment would be attracted to the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor, in turn producing tens of thousands of new jobs, as well as new dwellings, and pulling in new residents, plus many millions of dollars in new tax revenue.

Yet in the 1960s, Arlington's leaders had no crystal ball. They simply had faith that properly located rail transit would catalyze the revitalization of what was then a suburban strip of spotty, low-density commercial properties located minutes from downtown Washington.

They also understood that building rail transit entails more than providing transportation. It is an integral part of



land-use planning and sustainable growth policy. It affects the location, character and quality of development.

The Rosslyn-Ballston corridor is a work in progress, although millions of square feet of buildings already have been developed, mostly since the 1980s. Its urban design is not flawless, and much of its architecture is less than exemplary.

But the corridor functions well. It offers pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, on- and off-street bicycle lanes, plazas and mini-parks. It takes less than 10 minutes to walk between any two adjacent Metro nodes on the corridor — Rosslyn, Court House, Clarendon, Virginia Square and Ballston. People there can get along without cars.

Appropriately high densities and

multiple uses — commercial, residential, civic, cultural and educational — are concentrated at each node. Intense redevelopment and convenient transportation have made the corridor successful as a place to live, shop and play, as well as to work or commute to work.

You have to wonder: Are there other places in the region where this sort of

redevelopment could have occurred, or where it could still happen?

Many Metro stations are too far apart to emulate Arlington. But Arlington's strategy could be replicated if additional Metro stations were built where new growth or redevelopment is desired, or where development is underserved by transit.

For example, Wisconsin Avenue and Rockville Pike constitute a busy transportation corridor stretching for miles from Friendship Heights through Bethesda and Rockville. Metro's Red Line runs along this corridor, yet Bethesda's large, highly urbanized center is served by only one station; it should be served by two or three.

Envision Rockville Pike transformed from an incoherent string of auto-dependent, suburban shopping centers to a dense, attractive urban corridor friendly to pedestrians and bicyclists. It now has three Metro stations; it would need at least twice as many to catalyze and support desired redevelopment.

Intense redevelopment of the pike, capitalizing on existing infrastructure, would be desirable for compelling reasons: to reduce travel inefficiency and congestion associated with suburban sprawl, to mitigate escalating economic and environmental costs of gasoline consumption, to reap the benefits of resource conservation and diminished carbon emissions and, with more opportunities for walking and bicycling instead of driving, to improve health.

Why does visionary planning seem to be a thing of the past? Can America no longer afford to undertake farsighted initiatives such as creating the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s or Metro in the 1960s?

We can afford such investments but are no longer willing to make them.

If current attitudes concerning taxation and spending policies persist, we will never make essential public investments. What America needs is an attitude transplant, which may happen only when gasoline costs \$10 per gallon and the planet's polar ice disappears. Perhaps then we will remember and embrace the decades-old lesson that Arlington teaches.

Roger K. Lewis is a practicing architect and a professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Maryland.

BY ROGER K. LEWIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST